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ABSTRACT

This paper traces a brief history of the development of American librarianship as a profession and examines the social climate from which it emerged. Several traditional and modern models of professionalism are discussed and applied to librarianship. Shortcomings of the profession, e.g., its scholarship and the non-prescriptive nature of its client-patron relations, are discussed in the light of these models. Also discussed is the ideologically based criticism of professionalism that emerged in the 1960s which suggested that hegemony over certain critical areas of knowledge, rather than placing professionals in a position to serve society better, might be used as a basis for social inequality. The summary discusses contemporary librarianship as it related to the traditional models, the validity of those models for today's world, and the options and prospects for librarianship in the 1980s. (Author/RAA)

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PROFESSIONALISM

AND

AMERICAN LIBRARIANSHIP

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ABSTRACT:

This paper traces a brief history of the development of American librarianship as a profession and examines the social climate from which it emerged. Several traditional and modern models of professionalism are discussed and applied to librarianship. Shortcomings of the profession, e.g. its scholarship, the non-prescriptive nature of its client-patron relations, etc., are discussed in light of those models. The ideologically based criticism of professionalism that emerged in the 1960s which suggested that hegemony over certain critical areas of knowledge, rather than placing professionals in a position to serve society better, might be used as a basis for social inequality is discussed as well. The summary examines how closely contemporary librarianship approaches traditional professional models, the validity of those models for today's world, and the options and prospects for librarianship as we enter the 1980s.

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The origins of many vocations we today call professions were prefigured early on in the great movement towards association that characterized eleventh century Europe. By the fifteenth century this corporate spirit had touched all classes of city dwellers. The clergy, legal, medical, and teaching vocations as well as merchants, shopkeepers, and craftsmen, "were all entrenched behind the bulwarks of professional association.[1] Many of the emergent learned professions passed within the church. Educators were so closely associated with ecclesiastical functions "that the priest and the teacher were distinguished with difficulty."[2] Secularization of professions, however, occured with the Renaissance and this process was complete by the end of the 16th century.

The roots of many of our modern ideas about professions may be traced back to the industrial revolution. Opinions held then still color perceptions today. Although the idea of the professional as someone in possession of specialized knowledge and specialized intellectual techniques had been present earlier, the view that professions are "first and foremost ... gentlemen's occupations," providing "a safe niche in the social hierarchy," appears to be a phenomenon of the 18th century.[3]

The professionalization of librarianship is a product of the late 19th century, although libraries and librarians had existed since Imperial Rome and before. However, as Butler points out, the monastic libraries of the Middle Ages and the princely and municipal libraries of the Enlightenment were "forerunners rather than ancestors of the modern library."[4] Nonetheless, much had been asked of these early libraries. Indeed, when describing qualifications that ought to be "united in your librarian" to a gathering of the general assembly of the Sorbonne in 1780, Cotton des Houssayes' expectations

were high. The model he painted would be "a learned and profound theologian [in which] should be united vast literary acquisitions, an exact and precise knowledge of all the arts and sciences, great facility of expression, and lastly that exquisite politeness which conciliates the affection of his visitors while his merit secures their esteem."[5]

Many librarians, however, fell short of the lofty vision of des Houssayes. In America, it was not until the 1850s, Butler notes, that librarians came to know themselves as "bookmen" and "thought less of the janitorial and custodial duties of [the] office and more of the intellectual and the literary." By the 1870s, American librarians had emerged as technicians as well, having devised schemes for the systematic arrangement, inventorying, and storage of their collections. By now, a mood of social uplift was prevalent in America. The late 19th century was a period of emergent public education, social services to the new urban laboring classes, and philanthropic gestures of the wealthy. In the ferment of the times, librarians discovered a need to serve other than their traditional elite clientele. Armed with a social mission, a new technology, and an intellectual obligation, a new librarian set forth. Where his emphasis had been upon the individual it now shifted to the community, allowing, as Butler phrased it, "the particular [to give] place to the general and description [to] pass into explanation."[6]

The librarian's new self-consciousness, combined with an awareness of his cultural environment, soon led to association and to a new self-assuredness. "Without assumption," Dewey confidently if somewhat prematurely announced in 1876, librarianship might be spoken of as a profession and no longer as an occupation. The library had ceased being a museum and the librarian its cura-

tor. It now stood shoulder to shoulder with the school in its teaching function, and librarians in the front ranks with "teachers and preachers."[7]

Librarianship was not alone, however, in its claim to professional status. Bledstein suggests that by 1870, but beginning after 1840, "a culture of professionalism," born of Victorian "control over the release of personal and social energies," had come into existence. Professionalism with its attendant rituals, ceremonies, and symbols appears to have satisfied the Victorian need to structure their lives and their activities. Professionalism came to influence, he suggests, popular culture as well as learned occupations and the academy. Spectator sports, mundane occupations, even individual hygiene, was spoken of as somehow being "professional." In their principal role, however, the professions were the highest form through which the emergent middle class "could pursue its primary goals of earning a good living, elevating both the moral and intellectual tone of society, and emulating the status of those above one on the social ladder."[8]

Late nineteenth century America witnessed rapid economic and industrial expansion. Increasingly larger numbers of people came to be found in the middle ranks of this new society. But Goode points out that in an "open class stratification system," not only are individuals competing with one another ... but occupations, too, are engaged in the same competition and may move up or down in power, prestige, or income.[9] This competition may be viewed, he suggests, as a "zero-sum game" in which the rise of an individual or an occupation is at the expense of another for, although "an expanding economy may yield more real income for nearly all occupations ... at any given time there is only so much income to be distributed."[10] Thus, the new quest for professional advantage placed librarians in competition with other

groups for the finite tangible and intangible rewards of professional status.

As we have noted, the term "professional" had become blurred as it became common to speak of the "professional baseball player," or of the "professional cook." By the turn of the century, Asheim notes, professional aspirations too were diffuse and generalized.[11] Although associations and university-level training programs had been formulated, it had been done pell-mell and in uncritical emulation of the older "secure" professions, i.e. medicine, law, etc.[12] It was a situation that demanded clarification and definition.

An early and classic enunciation of criteria by which aspiring professions might be judged was Flexner's famous 1915 consideration of the relative professional merits of social work.[13] Until quite recently, most formulations of professional criteria were largely derivitive of Flexner's pioneering effort. He listed six:

1.) The work must be essentially intellectual in nature, the practitioner exercising a very large individual discretion over his work. (This major personal responsibility derives from the essential intellectual nature of the work.)

2.) The raw material of the profession must not be drawn from generally accessable knowledge and experience. A learned character, e.g. a scholarship is essential.

3.) Although intellectual and theoretical in nature, a profession must, nonetheless, possess a practical goal.

4.) A profession must possess a technique capable of transmission through "an orderly and highly specialized educational discipline," the members of which are "pretty well agreed" as to the specific objectives the profession seeks to fulfill.

5.) Members tend toward "self-organization," their professional activities "so definite, so absorbing in interest, so rich in duties and responsibilities" that the practitioner's personal as well as his professional life tends to organize around a professional nucleus. This results in the transformation of the profession into a "brotherhood" with "strong class consciousness."

6.) The professional organization is "explicitely and admittedly "aimed at "the advancement of the common social interest," its members becoming increasingly altruistic in motivation. (Flexner goes to some pains, however, to point out that the altruism characteristic of a professional hardly precludes just remuneration for services rendered. "Professions cannot develop on the basis of volunteer or underpaid service" and, he questions, "am I mistaken that not infrequently the inner joy attached to philanthropic endeavor has seemed to those in control a more complete satisfaction of the worker's legitimate desires than it has seemed ... to the worker?")

For reasons that will become clear later, Flexner also qualified his description of the "class consciousness"that accompanies his model of professionalism. Although "externally somewhat aristocratic," his ideal professions are "highly democratic institutions," wherein "gratuitous and arbitrary distinctions" based on "birth or wealth or some other accident" are abrogated. Qualifications are determined "by the nature of the responsibility alone," and if membership "depends solely on satisfying terms thus arrived at, then professions must be adjudged thoroughly democratic in essence."

Flexner judged social work to have failed to conform to some professional criteria while satisfying others. Although Flexner was not speaking of librarianship, one is tempted to assume that had he chosen that field rather

than social work his final judgment would have been the same.

In 1961, Edwards abstracted six criteria for professionalism from his reading of the voluminous literature on the topic that had proliferated since Flexner. Other criteria, he suggests, might be added to the six but they would be largely derivitive. Edward's criteria are considerably more developed than, although not in contridiction with, Flexner's. One is left to speculate that Flexner would have judged social work, and by extension librarianship, more harshly had he used Edward's criteria. In any case, they represent a good distillation of critical thinking since Flexner's time. They are:

1.) A body of knowledge and systematically organized theory underlie and are necessary to the performance of a professional service.

2.) The services offered by the profession are very important to society and, therefore, a matter of broad public concern.

3.) Because of the superior knowledge and competence of the members of the profession, that profession is granted a monoply on the right to perform its professional service and on the right to choose and admit new members to its ranks.

4.) That superior knowledge also means that no one outside the profession can be qualified to exercise authority over, or even to evaluate the quality of, the service of the professional members.

5.) Because society grants a monopoly and defers to the authority of a profession, it is incumbent on the members of the profession to establish and adhere to a stringently self-regulating code of ethics in which the good of the society takes precedent over the personal benefit of the members.

6.) The individual member of a profession becomes part of a professional

"culture," and he shares its altruistic motivation, accepts his part of its responsibility to society, and takes pride in its accomplishments. His professional role becomes, in the process, a central aspect of his life and self concept.

While the primary purpose of this paper is not to essay a critical judgment of how well librarianship does or does not fit a professional model, it would be well to review some of the shortcomings to which serious critics of librarianship have pointed.

In 1951, some seventy-five years after Dewey's confident characterization of librarianship as a profession, Butler nonetheless could state that while "we all do believe that librarianship is a profession ... our belief here is an emotional conviction rather than a rational conclusion."[15] He was most critical of the scholarship of librarianship, a body of knowledge that he suggests ought to constitute an "organic integration of the scientific, the technological, and the humanistic." While "the intellectual content of librarianship undoubtedly consists of three distinct branches," dealing as it does with "things and principles that must be scientifically handled, with processes and apparatus that require special understanding and skills ... and with cultural motivations that can be apprehended only humanistically," this triune content is not "so abstruse as to become a special professional scholarship." Librarians, he notes, "always have operated with an empirical rather than a theoretical attitude toward their problems," and their techniques are "so matter-of-fact that a layman can quickly learn them on the job." He further suggests that the lack "of an explicit humanistic discipline" probably accounts for two "distressing characteristics" of librarians, "their ancillary attitude and their faddishness." Although, as Asheim notes,[16]

Butler may have given us cold comfort when he conceded that "the development of a complete professional scholarship [of librarianship] is retarded rather than unnecessary."

The situation apparently had not improved by 1961. In criticizing "the knowledge base" of librarianship, Goode suggests that some two-thirds of library work is non-professional in nature, the dividing line between professional and clerical obscure.[17] It is this inadequate development and mastery of the scholarship of librarianship that has led to the librarian's inability to claim the right to arbitrate with authority the problems of his jurisdiction, Goode concludes.

The non-prescriptive nature of the professional-client relationship in librarianship came under attack by Bundy and Wasserman in 1968.[18] They defined the client relationship as "the central role of any professional ... his raison d'être." The professional, by virtue of his specialized training and expertise, offers the client counsel, service, or prescription which the professional views as appropriate "whether or not this is precisely what the client wants or thinks he wants."[19] The librarian-client relationship does not live up to this formulation, Bundy and Wasserman find. The generalist background of many librarians, they observe, may account for the librarian's willingness to "play an inexpert role," to satisfy themselves with performing "in minor and inconsequential capacities," and "to remain medium- rather than client-oriented." Increased subject competence, however, might lead to respect and acceptance of his professional judgment, allowing the librarian to move away "from a fundamentally passive to a more aggressive role in information prescription."

Asheim notes that the modern reticence to prescribe, while undoubtedly

based on the lack of developed theory upon which to base prescriptions, has not always been the case in librarianship.[20] Librarians of an earlier age exercised considerable authority, controlling access to collections which they developed with only those materials deemed appropriate of suitable. It appears that it was only with the rise of the free public library that the generally accepted modern idea of unlimited freedom of access to all points of view surfaced.

These criticisms, representing some of the more thoughtful assessments of how closely librarianship approaches the professional ideal, although critical are firmly rooted in the belief that the professional model is an appropriate one for librarians. The implication has always been that, could we but correct our deficiencies, it might indeed be achieved. Even Butler viewed librarianship as inherently a profession although he did not feel librarians always lived up to their calling, frequently slighting intellectual content for technical innovation and faddishness. Still, by mid-century, it became common to speak of professionalism as a continuum and librarianship as an "emerging" profession moving in the right direction along that continuum.

During the 1960s, however, a new kind of criticism emerged. Emboldened by the social ferment of the times, advocates of radical social change attacked the concept of professionalism itself. Asheim notes that "almost every characteristic traditionally assigned to professions began to seem a fault rather than a virtue ..."[21] Like others, librarianship was subjected to a scrutiny of practice and goals by the militants of the era. Hegemony over certain critical areas of knowledge no longer put professionals in a position better to serve society, rather, it was suggested, it provided a basis

for social inequality; formalization of qualifications, testing and screening for credentials, professional rather than community control of standards and ethics, etc. were now accused of being methods of maintaining elitist advantage. "In America, the notion of professionalism defines itself not so much as a life's work one is committed to, but as an economic and social class ... No one who has accepted the title of professional, or who aspires to it, can be anything but quiet, careful and conservative ..."[22] "I no longer believe that professionalism is the solution, on the contrary, it is the problem."[23]

Flexner's model, his highly democratic brotherhood which abrogates distinctions based on "birth and wealth" stood challenged. The new breed of critics urged professionals to abandon their traditional stance of objectivity and neutrality and to forge themselves into instruments of social change, providing services, i.e. I and R, traditionally considered outside the range of professional competence. The furor has calmed, of course, in the late 1970s, and Asheim finds that the thesis-antithesis of the 1960s is being forged into the synthesis of the 1970s. He notes that many of yesterday's militants are today's administrators working conscientiously for constructive change through traditional channels.

One of the demands of the 1960s militants was for more involvement in the library decision-making processes. The administration came to be seen as part of the "establishment," their views inimical to those of the "workers." This demand received considerable support, if not always for the precise reasons advanced by the militants. The traditional Weberian hierarchical structure in libraries had often been criticised "not only as detrimental to a service responsive to the client, but also as inimical to the full pro-

fessional development of the individual staff member."[24] Traditionally, members of established professions had worked outside of and had eschewed obligation to institutions, viewing their primary responsibilities as those of client and profession. A key proponent of a new set of professional relationships was Eldred Smith who, in 1970, advocated an authority structure which would remove serious obstacles in the path of developing professionalism and professional status: "A crucial problem is the bureaucratic structure of libraries which emphasizes institutional goals and loyalties. Professional service functions must be made clearly primary, and distinguished from nonprofessional, secondary institutional functions. Librarians must transform their hierarchical, bureaucratic junctions with each other into collegial, professional relations."[25]

While the 1960s appear to have shaken our complacency they do not appear to have seriously damaged our conviction that librarianship is, in the final analysis, a profession. Edwards notes that the period witnessed "an increase in writing about the theoretical bases of librarianship and about library professionalism."[26] The concensus he draws from these writings indicates neither shaken faith in the traditional model of professionalism nor lack of resolve in its pursuit. On the contrary, Edwards concludes from his reading of the literature "that librarianship by its nature should qualify as a profession, and a leading and universally recognized profession at that."[27] Asheim suggests that what the 1960s did do was to dissuade us of the assumption that if librarianship did not achieve a closer fit with the professional model, inevitably librarianship must be lacking. Now, he suggests we are free "to evaluate the practices of librarians on their own terms, and to decide whether criteria borrowed from other occupations are really

applicable."[28]

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS:

In this brief paper, we have examined the origins of professions, the social climate out of which modern librarianship was born, and traditional and modern criteria used to evaluate how closely an occupation may approach the professional model. Further, we have surveyed critical evaluations of librarianship's position on the nonprofessional-professional continuum as well as recent ideologically based criticism of the traditional professional model itself. We will now briefly address the following questions:

1.) How closely does contemporary librarianship approach the traditional professional model?

2.) Does that model remain valid today?

3.) What are the options and prospects for librarianship as a profession as we enter the 1980s?

Although when he wrote Flexner found social work (read librarianship) lacking, today the profession fares quite well when judged against his early criteria: The nature of the work is intellectual, we have a scholarship, albeit a vulnerable and much maligned one, and librarianship indeed is possessed of a practical goal, a formal educational program, a social mission, and of professional organization. Although our scholarship, our professional education, and our organizations still fall short of the rigorous development and organization of those of the "secure" professions, i.e. medicine, law, etc., they have advanced much since Flexner failed social welfare and may no longer be accused of being mere trappings. (It is well to bear in mind, too, that "secure" professions themselves often fall short of fully satisfying the model and have, in recent years, come under considerable critic-

ism for their own shortcomings.) Further, a graduate degree is now a universal requirement for professional employment, with additional graduate subject degrees preferred, if not required, in most academic libraries. Professional journals are not in short supply and their intellectual content becomes increasingly more rigorous. Today too, scholarship is often a requirement of employment, particularly in academic and research libraries.

Librarianship, however, fares less well when compared against the more highly refined criteria advanced by Edwards. Our services do not appear to be perceived as very important by broad cross sections of the population with even regular library users rarely distinguishing between librarians and clerks. This lack of public recognition of the "superior knowledge" of librarians has contributed, no doubt, to the rather weak degree of authority librarians exercise over their profession and the rather high degree of evaluation of services that is done by those outside the profession. Librarians, too, have a weak self-image with no consistent conception of what distinguishes professionals or professional services, Edwards found.[29] This results in a great variation in librarian's personal sense of professionalism.

As we have seen, one aspect of traditional library life that seems to mitigate against the development of a higher level of professionalism is the bureaucratic hierarchy that exists in most libraries. Here, the interdependency of the work and the segmentation of the assigned tasks, as well as the debilitatingly regular schedule of hours often tends to thwart individual responsibility and efforts at self-organization and self-governance.

In sum, we may assert that librarianship possesses all the requisite traditional criteria of professions. Some of these criteria exist in less

than fully developed measure while many appear as developed as their counterparts in the "secure" professions. All, however, are developed beyond the embryonic stage. Although a definitive evaluation is beyond the scope of this brief paper, it seems fair to state that librarianship is a strongly "emerging" profession with the potential to develop into a fully developed, secure, and adequately respected and compensated one.

The attacks made upon professionalism in the 1960s were directed both at the intentions of individual professionals (self-serving and discriminatory) and at the criteria of professionalism (structures designed to protect the interests of the practitioners not of the client). In my opinion, the former accusation could more successfully be maintained: Undoubtedly some professions have been self-serving and discriminatory. The basic structure of professionalism, however, strikes me as well designed for the protection of standards, the interests of clients, and the regulation of practitioners. That it might be misued by the ill-intended is a possibility. If this has occured more stringent codes of ethics and better methods of enforcement should be introduced.

The foregoing discussion does not mean, however, that the traditional criteria of professionalism are sacrosanct. We have noted significant modification of Flexner's original criterial, e.g. the emphasis placed upon professional-client relationships by Bundy and Wasserman, the corrosive effect of the bureaucratic structure on professional development, the structure and function of the professional association (not discussed in this paper) etc. All represent expansion and change of original criteria over time. Asheim suggests that the critical movement of the 1960s demonstrated "that it is possible to examine the professional criteria and to reject them

if they are found wanting ..." and to "evaluate the practices of librarians on their own terms, and to decide whether criteria borrowed from other occupations are really applicable."[30] Although it seems that it would be imprudent to jettison any of the basic criteria, it is clear that there is historical precedent for change. We must recognize and control that change as we continue to strive to achieve full professional status. For librarians, this implies increasingly rigorous educational preparation, consistent adherence to and strengthening of standards, primacy of the needs of the client over institutional loyalties, the development of a collegial organizational model, and stringent professional and organizational control. In this manner we will elaborate and maintain a truly democratic structure free of the abuse and discrimination of which Flexner, as well as the 1960s militants, warned. I believe this is the path by which we may warrant and win the sanction and respect of society so important to our own professional fulfillment.

It is clear to even the least perceptive observer that librarianship currently is undergoing profound change. The automation of bibliographic recordkeeping, the liberation of the "information specialist" from the confines of the traditional library made possible by remote terminal access of information increasingly available only in the form of text on-line, even the decline of that traditional library artifact, the book, in the wake of increasing demand for information "bytes" rather than refined "knowledge," are suggestive of the enormity of that change. The great regional bibliographic utilities that have developed in the past few years have awakened us to the potentials of networking and resource sharing and set us to pondering the feasibility of a national network. Clearly, participation in this

effort will allow individual libraries, through cooperation, to share in the unfolding of a national bibliographic resource of unparalleled dimension.

The climate of librarianship, as we enter the 1980s, presents librarians with enormous challenge and opportunity. The fulfillment of many of the criteria of professionalism we have discussed, i.e. the degree and consistency of self concept, the level of scholarship, the degree of independence intellectual training and environment permit; in brief, the level at which professionals are prepared and allowed to function, bears directly on how and if librarians will seize the moment. American librarians come out of a great humanistic tradition. They have developed our libraries into institutions that are among our most democratic. To risk both to new configurations of technicians whose formation has been in the marketplace and to institutions whose "data base" becomes increasingly more responsive to "market" influences seems quite unwise. Clearly, only highly trained and highly "professional" librarians will be prepared to rise to the challenge.

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